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ABSTRACT

The ideas of four contemporary poets--Ann Deagon, Lyn Lifshin, Marge Piercy, and Alice Walker--concerning the oral interpretation of poetry are presented in this paper. The poets' ideas relate to the following topics: (1) the importance of reading poems aloud: (2) reasons why they give poetry readings, and effects of their poetry readings on their poetry: and (3) their attitudes toward the oral interpretation of their poetry by other people. The paper summarizes the poets' responses by noting that all the poets except Walker believe strongly that the oral interpretation of a poem is necessary for its full realization: that Piercy and Lifshin find their own poetry readings often give them critical insights that lead them to make changes in their poems: and that Deagon, Piercy, and Lifshin all are interested in hearing good oral interpretations of their poetry by other people. (Most of the comments presented in the paper were made by Deagon, Lifshin, and Piercy during long interviews: only a few ideas of Walker, who was interviewed briefly, are included.) (GT)

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A CONVERSATION WITH FOUR CONTEMPORARY POETS ABOUT ORAL INTERPRETATION

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A CONVERSATION WITH FOUR CONTEMPORARY POETS ABOUT ORAL INTERPRETATION

Today more and more poets are giving readings of their own poetry. It is both interesting and significant to those of us in the field of oral interpretation to learn the views of some contemporary poets concerning oral interpretation. As part of an extensive study of poetry by contemporary American women, I interviewed at length three poets -- Ann Deagon, Lyn Lifshin, and Marge Piercy -- and had a briefer conversation with a fourth poet, Alice Walker. I selected these four poets because their work represents some of the variety of subject matter, themes, attitudes and styles in contemporary poetry by American women. I knew nothing of their attitudes about oral interpretation other than that they all do give poetry readings. The poets talked with me first about their ideas concerning the oral interpretation of poetry in general, second concerning their oral interpretation of their own poetry, and third concerning the oral interpretation of their poetry by other people.

My first question to the poets involved their ideas about the oral interpretation of poetry in general. I asked each poet how important the oral, or sound, element of a poem is to her. In other words, is a poem just as fully realized on the written page as it is when read aloud? To this Ann Deagon gave the following reply:

> No. It definitely isn't. Being on the page is simply the poem of notation. It's <u>almost</u> like saying to a musician, well, is it the score that you're interested in or is it the record [recording]? 1

Deagon went on to say that she would almost rather be published on tape than in a book, or at least in both.

Alice Walker disagreed. She replied that, to her, a poem is

even more fully realized when it is on the page than when it is read aloud. She feels that a person can never absorb all of a poem when it is read aloud, not even the most accessible poem. And she said that she herself likes to read a poem over and over to herself, nine or ten times, to get all that she can from it. She added that it is strange that she should feel this way, coming as she does from a background of the Black oral tradition. [2]

Marge Piercy feels a strong identification with the oral tradition in literature, and, for her, a poem receives its "life" only when it is read aloud: "The primary life of the poem is the spoken life." And Piercy says that asking her why she gives poetry readings is "like saying to a musician why do you perform?" [3] Also, in some lines from her poem "Laying Down the Tower," Piercy has described poetry as an oral phenomenon, meant to be shared aloud with others: "A poem is a dancing: it goes out of a mouth to your ears/ and for some moments aligns us,/ so we wheel and turn together." [4]

Piercy also said that when she teaches poetry workshops, she has the students read their own poetry aloud, in order to teach them to "develop their ear," "because with a tin ear, your ideas may be interesting, but your writing isn't going to be good. And a lot of writers write too much for the eye and much too little for the ear."[5]

Lyn Lifshin has said that she thinks it very important to have poetry read aloud: "I feel very strongly about it being read aloud." She believes that reading a poem aloud gives it "something extra," an extra "dimension." She says that before she gave many poetry readings herself, she used to enjoy very much sitting around with a group of people who would take turns reading aloud poems by various poets whose work they liked. [6] She has also stated: "Hearing the

poems read aloud can make it easier for the listener to become aware of the music, the rhythm, the first thing I react to, before imagery even, in most poems." [7]

Lifshin, like Piercy, says that when she teaches poetry workshops, she has the students read their own poems aloud. Furthermore, she usually has each poem read three times -- once by the person who wrote it, once by someone else, and once by Lifshin herself -- so that the poem is "read in three different voices." She thinks that it helps writers to hear other people read their own poems, in that it may "trigger" them to write a poem on the same theme. This is more likely to happen, she feels, if the poem is read aloud, rather than simply handing the person a poem printed on a page and asking him to write a poem on the same theme. Also, she says, "Some people who read can make anything sound good," so, again, it helps to hear the poem in different "voices." [8]

My second set of questions to the poets concerned their oral interpretation of their own poetry. Among the questions I asked them on this topic were (1) why they give poetry readings and (2) whether or not their poetry readings ever <u>change</u> their poetry. When asked what her main reason is for giving poetry readings, Ann Deagon replied:

> I like the direct <u>experience</u> of people responding to what I'm doing. I like simply the <u>thing</u> that happens there in the room. I find it very exhilarating, not only to myself, but I think usually to the other people in the room. And I feel that a thing is <u>happening</u> between us, which is a good, human thing. There are all kinds of intercourse among people, but I think that the intercourse that goes on there is very valuable. I think of it also not so much that they go away impressed by me, which they may, but that they go away stirred within themselves, and in that respect I believe it's very much like teaching. [9]

Also, Deagon feels that her readings are especially important for communicating the "emotional rhythms" of her poetry. Deagon

says that when she reads her poetry aloud, she is aware of at least three rhythms that are occurring. One is the "syntactical rhythm," or the rhythm of the sentence, with long and short clauses. The second is the "line-break rhythm," including the caesuras and the breaks at the ends of lines. And the third is what she calls the "emotional rhythm," or how she feels about those words, which also acts as a rhythm. This emotional rhythm she thinks of as mainly "quantitative," that is, how slowly or how quickly she says certain words -- what she draws out and what she passes over quickly. This is the rhythm which to her is the most important, and it is also what she hears in her head "as the poem is writing." [10]

Finally, Deagon says that through her poetry readings she is able to combine both her interest in writing and her former interest in acting (she performed in several plays while in college).[11]

For Marge Piercy, her own poetry reading has many functions. First, it is a shared "<u>experience</u>," which she actually calls a "ritual," and one that creates "energy" among the people present. She especially enjoys readings in which she and the audience have a sense of common purpose. She feels also that it is good for women and men to "see a woman stand up and say strongly strong poetry," poetry out of women's experiences and poetry with strong political statements. She would further hope that people would be influenced by the ideas in the poetry. Another reason for poetry readings is that it is "good for people to hear poetry that can <u>touch</u> them. It's good for people to have a renewed feeling for poetry, to be turned onto it." Still another reason for Piercy's giving poetry readings is that she feels they encourage creativity: "Poetry is one of the arts which is least hierarchical. Everybody can write poems. Even if you're illiterate, you can make up poems, you can memorize them.

Poetry is pre the written -- it long antedates the ability to write it down." Also, practically speaking, she says that poetry readings increase the potentiality of selling one's books. Finally, she enjoys poetry readings for the audience response, since

> ...one of the coins in which poets are paid, like musicians, is in audience response, immediate feedback, the emotional response of live bodies, and people's faces.... [12]

Piercy was influenced, she says, by watching some of the Black poets in the late sixties give readings of their own poetry -- poets such as Sonia Sanchez, Don Lee, and Nikki Giovanni. She says that it was not their style of reading that influenced her, but that they seemed to have a sense of "constituency," and they were not afraid to "move" their audiences:

> ...they were expressing for people, ...they were quite sure they had function, and I liked that a lot. They...were not at all ashamed to move the audience, to do what was necessary to reach people....(They) provided more motivation and example of something that I wanted a relationship with an audience to be. [13]

Asked why she gives poetry readings, Lyn Lifshin gave five reasons. First, of her own poetry readings, Lifshin has written:

> Readings really are an offering, and like all offerings there's some panic that what's being offered might be refused. [14]

Second, concerning what she tries to communicate in reading a particular poem, Lifshin says:

> Emotion, mainly, -- a sensual feeling of what it would be like to either feel something, or to be at a certain place ...sensuousness is really important to me, whether it's something about the way light is, or the feeling of skin...the touch...it's really something concrete and physical, nothing abstract and philosophical. Emotion more than the thought content. [15]

Third, it is a good way, if the reader is good, to interest people in the poetry. Next, she has found the giving of poetry readings

helpful to her career, especially when people hear her and then ask her to give another reading elsewhere. Also, giving poetry readings seems to nicely combine her former interest in performance with her present writing interests. Lifshin took some private "elocution" lessons for about a month when she was nine or ten years old, and later acted in a few high school plays. She also majored briefly in acting as a college freshman.[16]

Oral interpreters often find that, in rehearsing a poem, they gain new insights into the poem. I have answers from three of the poets concerning whether or not giving poetry readings gives them new insights, or ever changes their poetry in any way. Ann Deagon said both yes and no. It does change the poetry in the sense that every experience she has of the "exchange" of her poetry will change the future. What she writes is cumulative, from a build-up of her own experience, so each experience has an impact on the next poem that she writes. On the other hand, giving poetry readings does not change her poetry in that poems do happen orally in her head as she writes them. Reading them aloud reinforces that, but she doesn't think that it changes the poetry: "I would still be reading it to myself, in my head, if I didn't have the opportunity of reading to other people."[17]

To the same question, Marge Piercy replied:

> Oh, yes. The parts that don't work really stand out. The first time you read a new poem, you discover it's too long, too short, it doesn't work, the images don't cohere, the rhythm doesn't work, the language isn't quite there. You find all kinds of things wrong. You find out what you should leave out, often....You hear all kinds of things in it that you thought you could get away with, but which you didn't do right.

Piercy went on to say that often she will read a poem three or four times, and it "shakes down," or is revised, each time. She feels that

"learning to say your poems is a very good way of developing a critical ability...(of) your own work." [18]

Of particular significance for oral interpreters are the four effects which Lyn Lifshin's oral interpretation has on the revision of her own poetry. First, she sometimes changes lines during the reading of a poem, adding a few words to clarify, or add a little more detail, or to make a line more conversational. Second, as she reads a poem aloud, she sometimes "hears things that (she) didn't realize were there,...or things that should be left out." She will then revise the poem after the reading, omitting or changing a few words.[19] She says that often her oral reading of a poem is "closer to where [she] wants the line breaks and pauses. Often whole stanzas become changed. It's more of the final poem than the last printed version sometimes." [20] Third, when Lifshin was first giving poetry readings, she had primarily short poems to read. Then she and Diane Wakoski gave a reading together, and she liked the way in which the audience could really get "wrapped up" in some of Wakoski's longer narrative poems. After that, she decided to write some longer narrative poems herself. Finally, Lifshin said that when she was selecting poems for the recent Tangled Vines anthology which she edited (an anthology of mother-daughter poems), she read several of the poems by other poets to various audiences in order to compare their "feedback" on the poems. Part of her reason for the final selection of poems was based on this audience response.[21]

My final question to the poets concerned their attitudes toward the oral interpretation of their poetry by other people. Ann Deagon has heard a few other people read her poetry. Once she was listening to a radio program on which a journalist-critic was speaking of Southern writers. A man on the program read Deagon's poem "Chain."

His reading was "...a very painful experience to me, because he did not sing it, and although he was trying to sort of act it out, I thought he did it clumsily, and I just felt great pain....I want(ed) to say, 'No, that's not how you say that'....[22]

Deagon does not, however, feel that the poet herself is the only "valid" interpreter of her poem, or that only she herself could give a "sincere" reading of one of her poems. She is interested in various interpretations resulting from people's differing experiences of her poems. [23]

Finally, I asked Deagon if an oral interpreter (teacher, actor, etc.) reads one of her poems intelligently, with the feeling that is there, and communicates it effectively to the audience, how she would feel about that. Is she averse to other people orally interpreting her poetry if they do it well? She said no, not at all. In fact, the Black actress Vinie Burrows had written to her that she (Burrows) had performed Deagon's poem "Chain." Deagon was delighted about this because she knew Burrows to be a "splendid actress," and she knew that her feeling for it would be "very authentic":

> ...she has a feel for the language, and the emotion that she would be putting into it, although it's not identical with mine, it certainly has its own authenticity. So I would be delighted for someone who is accomplished in doing these things to do some of my work. [24]

Regarding the oral interpretation of her poetry by other people, Marge Piercy says that she generally is "not crazy about it." It is not, she says, that their interpretation of the poem is not "valid," but that since she has written the poem, she hears the sounds in a certain way, and she has a "bias" toward the poem being performed that way. But anyone who could read the poem well would be giving it a valid reading. The people whom she has heard read her work

have been primarily English students and professors. She did, she said, once hear an actress on television give a reading of her poem "Secretary Chant," and she thought that the actress used some interesting "slides" and vocal effects. [25]

When asked how she feels about other people orally interpreting her poetry, Lyn Lifshin said that she is "very much in favor of it." She especially likes the idea of a good reader being able to interest people in the poetry. When I first interviewed Lifshin, she had heard only one other person read her poetry aloud -- a woman at a poetry workshop Lifshin was giving -- who read Lifshin's "Tentacles, Leaves." She did not like the woman's reading of that particular poem. However, the next time I spoke with Lifshin, she said that she had recently heard a male friend, who was at her home, read some of her poems over the telephone to one of his friends, and she liked very much hearing them the way that he read them. [26]

In summary, one of the poets -- Walker -- does not believe that the oral interpretation of a poem makes it any more fully realized than when it is read silently from the printed page. Three of the poets -- Deagon, Piercy, and Lifshin -- believe strongly in the oral interpretation of poetry as necessary for full "realization" of the poem. For two of the poets especially, Piercy and Lifshin, their own poetry readings often give them critical insights which lead them to make changes in the poems. Furthermore, Deagon, Piercy and Lifshin all feel that they themselves are by no means the only "valid" interpreters of their own poems. They are interested in hearing <u>good</u> oral interpretation of their poetry by other people as well.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the area of contemporary poetry is one in which we in the field of oral interpretation

can provide a valuable service, in explicating the poetry of contemporary poets and in introducing our audiences to the best in poetry being written today.

END NOTES

[1]Personal interview with Ann Deagon, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y., March 24, 1978.

[2]Conversation with Alice Walker, New York City, March 13, 1978.

[3]Personal interview with Marge Piercy, Kingston, Rhode Island, February 21, 1978.

[4]Marge Piercy, To Be of Use (Garden City, N.Y., 1973), p. 95.

[5]Personal interview with Piercy.

[6]Personal interview with Lyn Lifshin, Niskayuna, N.Y., January 26, 1978.

[7]Lyn Lifshin, Offered by Owner (Cambridge, N.Y., 1978), p. 3.

[8]Personal interview with Lifshin, Niskayuna, N.Y.

[9]Personal interview with Deagon.

[10]Ibid. Also, A. McA. Miller, "Conversation with Ann Deagon," Poets in the South, 1, No. 1 (1977), 68.

[11]Personal interview with Deagon.

[12]Personal interview with Piercy.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Lifshin, Offered by Owner, p. 1.

[15]Personal interview with Lifshin.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Personal interview with Deagon.

[18]Personal interview with Piercy.

[19]Personal interview with Lifshin.

[20]Lifshin, Offered by Owner, p. 3.

[21]Personal interview with Lifshin.

[22]Personal interview with Deagon.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Personal interview with Piercy.

[26]Personal interview with Lyn Lifshin, Syracuse, N.Y., February 7, 1978.